

A Woman's Hero

“December 7th, 1941 -- a date which will live in infamy -- the United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked by naval and air forces of the Empire of Japan” (Roosevelt, 1941). President Roosevelt’s famous words marked the beginning of the United States’ involvement in World War 2. Preparing for this war became a nationwide event, impacting the lives of all Americans. Thousands of men enlisted into the war effort to become soldiers, training and shipping out to fight in faraway places (US Home Front, 2012). The increased number of men leaving the workforce to fight in the war meant that there was a shortage of workers for factory jobs.

American women came to the rescue. Iconic women volunteered to do their part in the war effort as well. They poured out in the thousands, taking on factory jobs recently vacated by their brothers, husbands, and fathers. Women helped build airplanes, tanks, and other vehicles for the war, working as riveters to hold together the American armies. “More than 310,000 women worked in the U.S. aircraft industry in 1943, making up 65 percent of the industry's total workforce” (Rosie the Riveter 2012). Women also worked in the munitions industry, building guns, bullets and bombs. Women became a vital cog in the American war machine that helped to secure a US victory in the war.

When considering America during this time, the familiar image of Rosie the Riveter comes to mind: a young woman with hair pulled up in a red scarf. She has on a blue jumpsuit and shows off her muscle with the caption, “We Can Do It!” (Milner, 1942). She represents the

large role that American women played in the war. They stepped up to help out their country in a time of need and secured their place in the American workforce. By the mid-1940s, the percentage of women in the American work force had expanded from 25 percent to 36 percent. (US Home Front, 2012). This number only continued to grow throughout the years, as women gained many new freedoms during World War II, among these, the freedom to hold occupations formerly only held by men.

Now here's the rest of the story.

The cheerful and smiling propaganda posters of World War II portray an image of the happy American housewife, who becomes a factory worker during hard times, to support her country. This idealistic image of Rosie the Riveter was not the champion of rights for ALL women, however.

Instead, Rosie represented the middle class white American woman. Rosie is a woman who has never had to work to support her family, nor experienced any racial prejudices preventing her from certain jobs or expressing her constitutional rights. Propaganda posters show these “working women” in full makeup, manicured nails, and up-do hairstyles. These are not women used to hard labor; they are simply doing their part in the effort because they can.

Women from lower socioeconomic levels and from minority groups often had jobs already and still had to fight for their families throughout the wartime. They often worked hard in unskilled labor, making ends meet and helping to feed their children because they had to provide support for their families. Women of color were often not be welcomed into the same manufacturing jobs as the white, middle class women portrayed in the wartime propaganda posters. This was a time before integration, a time of Jim Crow laws that segregated buses, water fountains, and public places. Women of African, Indian, and Asian descent were not depicted in

the posters, but many were already working hard to support their families, finding jobs in industries that accepted them, and they were not in a position to leave their jobs to join the manufacturing industry. In effect, companies were not trying to recruit women of color with their idealistic propaganda posters.

During this time, women of color were still denied basic rights, such as voting and equality under the law. Some women were even imprisoned during the war. Japanese American women, including those with full American citizenship status, were put into camps during the war and had to leave their homes and businesses behind (US Home Front, 2012). America was far from equal, yet we were involved in a war effort to thwart inequality and injustice abroad.

Rosie the Riveter, while a champion of the white middle class American woman, is not truly a champion of all women. World War II represented a strong push for certain groups of American women, excluding those of lower class or non-white racial backgrounds. Despite all of the positive, female empowerment associated with these propaganda posters, stark inequalities still existed in this time and are represented in the iconic images.

References

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